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Agriculture and Social Development

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Attacking Poverty

Building Solidarity

Creating Jobs

UNITED NATIONS

The Situation

On a global scale...
Poverty is a rural problem

Poor countries are agrarian countries
In the world's poorest countries:

♦ More than three quarters of the people live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for work and income;

♦ Agriculture accounts for nearly 40 per cent of the gross domestic product and more than half of export earnings.

Poor people are rural people

♦ More than 800 million of the world's 1.1 billion poor people live in rural areas, with the majority in Asia and Africa.

♦ 60 per cent of the rural population of sub-Saharan Africa live in poverty, as do 31 per cent of rural Asians.

Underemployment is a rural problem
Around 30 per cent of the world's total labour force is not productively employed. Most of the 800 million jobless and underemployed live in rural areas.

♦ In sub-Saharan Africa, over 50 per cent of the rural workforce is seasonally underemployed.

♦ Nearly 40 per cent of rural households in South Asia are landless, or else their farm plots are too small to provide year-round work. Among Bangladesh's 80 million landless and small landholders, nearly one third are underemployed or jobless.

Marginalization is a rural problem
The rural poor suffer not only from low incomes but from marginalization in every sense of the word — geographic, economic, social, cultural and political.

Vulnerable rural groups include those most easily and frequently disenfranchised: small farmers, the landless, women, nomadic pastoralists, artisanal fishermen and displaced persons. Generally, they lack both entitlement to food and productive resources and access to essential services, such as water, sanitation, medical care and education.

♦ In the least developed countries, less than a third of the rural poor have access to clean, safe drinking water. Barely a quarter have adequate sanitation.

♦ 80 per cent of the doctors in East Africa are based in cities, while more than 80 per cent of the people live in the countryside. In rural East Africa, there is one doctor for every 60,000 people (as opposed to one for every 500 people in developed countries).

♦ Adults in cities in the developing world are twice as likely to have had some schooling as those in rural areas.

Food insecurity is a rural problem
Worldwide, 800 million people suffer from chronic undernutrition. The vast majority live in rural areas of the developing world.

♦ The greatest concentration of the chronically undernourished, some 271 million people, live in South Asia. More than 80 per cent of them reside in rural areas.

Rural problems fuel urban problems
Every year, more than 80 million people from rural areas flood into cities in the developing world, driven mainly by poverty and the prospect of food, jobs, services and other opportunities.

♦ The urban population of the developing countries will grow from less than 1 billion in 1980 to 2.7 billion in 2010.

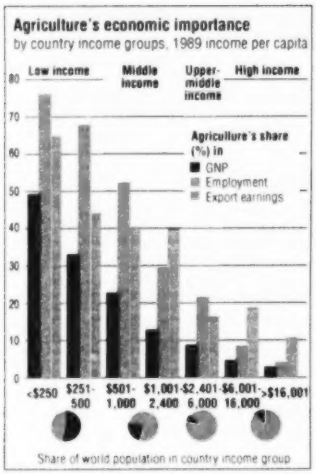
♦ Two thirds of the homeless people living on the streets of Bombay came to the city because they had no land; half arrived with little more than the clothes on their backs.

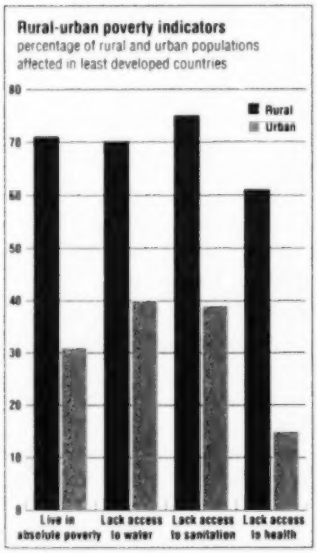
Rural problems threaten the global environment
The poverty of the rural poor in developing countries is a major cause of environmental degradation. In their struggle for survival, the poor are driven to practices that damage the environment, jeopardizing both their own food security and that of future generations.

♦ Shortening of fallow periods and continuous cultivation without replacing the soil nutrients damages soils and reduces crop yields. All countries in sub-Saharan Africa are estimated to suffer from nutrient mining.

♦ Every year about 15.4 million hectares of tropical forests are lost. A large part of the cutting and burning results from extension of grazing and cultivation, particularly shifting cultivation practiced by the poor.

♦ Overgrazing and overcultivation of fragile soils have been identified as major factors in dryland degradation and desertification. Croplands and rangelands covering an estimated 30 per cent of the world's land surface are threatened.




Rural-urban poverty indicators
percentage of rural and urban populations affected in least developed countries
Rural
Urban
Live in absolute poverty
Lack access to water
Lack access to sanitation
Lack access to health

Seeking Solutions

Rural problems need rural solutions

Since over 80 per cent of the world's poor live in rural areas, large-scale reduction in poverty will depend on gains in agricultural and rural development.

Attacking rural poverty

Most of the 800 million rural poor live in low-income food-deficit countries, where food insecurity, poverty, malnutrition and environmental degradation go hand in hand. In these countries, improvements in food production and productivity must be the engine of equitable and sustainable development. Keys to achieving such improvements include:

♦ *Developing areas with adequate to high agricultural potential:* An FAO study of 91 developing countries found that seven countries (i.e. Afghanistan, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Ethiopia—including Eritrea— Mozambique and Somalia) with very low household food security index ratings had the potential to produce more than enough essential food crops to meet their needs. Nearly half the countries studied could potentially meet more than twice their total requirements. Most of these gains would result from higher yields achieved through diffusion of improved technology – a "new green revolution";

♦ *Emphasizing food crops for local consumption:* Worsening terms of trade have steadily eroded the value of many cash crops. The fall in prices of Africa's export commodities between 1986 and 1990 is estimated to have cost the continent $50 billion in lost revenues. Low-income food-deficit countries, in particular, would benefit from reallocating resources to production of food crops for local consumption, including those traditional crops and varieties that so often are neglected in favour of high-yielding hybrids;

♦ *Establishing forestry or agro-forestry systems in areas with poor soils or steep slopes:* Millions of households in the developing world depend on trees and forests for shelter, fuel, food and fodder. In marginal areas, community-based forestry and agro-forestry can increase production and food security without endangering fragile ecosystems.

Other proven weapons in the battle against rural poverty include:

♦ *Labour-intensive public works:* Irrigation and road-building projects provide jobs and income, while reducing the isolation of the rural poor and increasing the assets of the community;

♦ *Improving access to land and credit:* Where small farmers, particularly women, have benefited from land reform and specialized credit institutions, harvests and incomes have increased and hunger has fallen. Effective reforms favouring small farmers have been shown to be among the most important factors in raising agricultural incomes.

Building solidarity with the rural poor

Rural development—and particularly eradication of rural poverty—can be achieved only with the voluntary and active participation of the rural people themselves. Therefore, policies and priorities must be directed towards promoting:

♦ *People's participation:* Of particular importance in rural areas is the strengthening of agricultural cooperatives, water users' associations, agricultural workers' unions and self-help community organizations;

♦ *Investment in rural infrastructure:* Studies show that investments in rural infrastructure—irrigation, roads, electricity, markets and communications — increase agricultural production and rural industry while reducing rural poverty;

♦ *Investment in rural people:* Providing basic education to the rural poor, particularly women, yields dramatic improvements in food production and household food security. According to one study, providing 10 years of education for every woman would have a more direct impact on child mortality than doubling income, providing sanitation and piped water, and turning every agricultural worker into a white-collar worker.

Creating rural jobs

Major increases in rural non-farm employment will be required to absorb the rapid growth in the rural labour force and stem the tide of migration to the cities. Steps to generate employment include:

♦ *Development of rural industries:* Food processing and other industries related to agriculture create jobs and retain value added in the rural areas. Making local produce available year-round improves food security and reduces micro-nutrient deficiencies;

♦ *Improving market infrastructure:* Efficient and equitable agricultural marketing systems contribute both to rural development and to increasing the supply of low-cost food to the urban poor.

Key publications

World agriculture: Towards 2010, an FAO study (N. Alexandratos, ed.), J. Wiley and Sons.

The State of Food and Agriculture 1994. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

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